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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRAVEL TO MARACAIBO

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

1. (C) The Ambassador visited Maracaibo, Zulia State, October 26-27, to meet with U.S. organizations, local leaders, and the press. He called on Governor Manuel Rosales, Maracaibo Mayor Giancarlo DiMartino, and San Francisco Mayor Saady Bijani. The Ambassador attended a lunch with business leaders hosted by Venamcham and a reception hosted by the binational center (CEVAZ). Chevron-Texaco received the Ambassador at two of its social development projects, a public children's hospital and a boys' orphanage. The Ambassador visited the editorial boards of Maracaibo dailies "Panorama" and "La Verdad" and gave several press interviews. There is general optimism that the economy is rebounding in Zulia, a state that manifests a historic autonomous streak and, to a lesser extent, resistance to President Hugo Chavez. End summary.

Zulian Politicos See Pains and Progress

2. (C) The Ambassador visited Zulia State capital Maracaibo, Venezuela's petroleum center and a key enclave of U.S. economic and social interests, on October 26-27. Governor Manuel Rosales, who was in the midst of campaigning for re-election on October 31, told him the national government had given practically no support to his administration, and often worked at cross-purposes via Corpozulia, the GOV-run development corporation there. Rosales said the GOV is operating under the guise of democracy and is run by people "with very different concepts of freedom of expression and human rights." Rosales attributed President Hugo Chavez's victory in Zulia during the recall referendum to Colombians, some living in Zulia and some in Colombia, who received Venezuelan identity cards and were illegally permitted to vote. Rosales also complained that ELN, FARC, and Colombian paramilitaries crossed freely into Venezuela, often to buy supplies, with the tacit approval of the Venezuelan military. The Ambassador expressed his desire to boost the U.S. profile in Zulia using the bi-national center (CEVAZ), the Venamcham, and the Maracaibo Consular Agency. Rosales encouraged the Ambassador to bolster relations with Zulia, noting possibilities in educational exchanges.

3. (C) Maracaibo Mayor Giancarlo DiMartino, whom Chavez endorsed for re-election, recounted the achievements of his administration. He noted that the Maracaibo police force had been re-designed via a strategic alliance with the Miami-Dade Police in Florida. DiMartino acknowledged that border crime, namely kidnapping and contraband, has grown more serious because of Colombian guerrilla and paramilitary groups. He also noted the problems with illicit drug use in Maracaibo, including ecstasy. The Ambassador offered to collaborate on counternarcotics matters, including investigation, interdiction, and education.

4. (C) The Ambassador met with Saady Bijani, mayor of San Francisco (to the south of Maracaibo municipality) and president of the Venezuelan Mayors' Association (ADAVE). Bijani warned of GOV social programs with Cuban assistance, especially the medical program Barrio Adentro. Bijani claimed that each Cuban "doctor" (often nurses, med students, or residents) has up to three other Cubans in charge of indoctrination of a specific poor neighborhood covered by the clinic. Regarding election fraud, Bijani said that before the presidential recall referendum, the GOV added 43,000 new voters to his constituency, a 30-pct. increase over the 150,000 voters previously registered. Bijani said the GOV had done this around the country to make it numerically difficult for more than 100 opposition mayors to be re-elected. Bijani also complained that the GOV is intentionally cutting off or delaying payments of legally entitled revenues to states and municipalities to weaken elected officials who oppose Chavez. The Ambassador assured Bijani the USG would continue to stand by its principles of supporting democratic institutions and promoting human rights

in Venezuela.

Visits To U.S. Organizations

15. (U) The Maracaibo Committee of the Venezuelan-American Chamber of Commerce (Venamcham) hosted a lunch for the Ambassador attended by more than 30 U.S. and Venezuelan business leaders. Participants expressed concern about kidnappings and other criminal activities of armed groups operating on the Colombian border. The Ambassador highlighted the need to break the nexus between the armed groups and narco-trafficking, a fundamental tenet of Plan Colombia. At a meeting with the Venezuelan-American Center (CEVAZ) board, the Ambassador expressed interest in augmenting CEVAZ's activities in Maracaibo and offered to help promote the center. CEVAZ hosted a reception for more than 100 ex-pats and community leaders as well. The Ambassador also visited the American school, Escuela Bella Vista (EBV), addressing high school and elementary students.

U.S. Corporate Social Projects

16. (U) The Ambassador visited the sites of two social development projects sponsored by Chevron-Texaco (CTX). The Pediatrics Specialties Hospital is a free public hospital operated by Zulia State that CTX helped to complete. The hospital serves hundreds of patients daily, and has modern facilities and equipment. The Ambassador also visited the Simon Rodriguez Orphanage, built by CTX and home to more than 30 orphaned boys. The Ambassador presented a collection of books on American history and culture to the boys. He highlighted corporate social responsibility and the strong relationship between the U.S. and Venezuelan people in his comments to the press.

The University of Zulia

17. (U) Leonardo Atencio, the recently-elected rector of the state-run University of Zulia (LUZ), hosted a lunch for the Ambassador. The Ambassador encouraged Atencio to consider increasing cooperation with U.S. universities (student and teacher exchanges) and to take advantage of CEVAZ's expertise in English language instruction. The Ambassador also highlighted the Fullbright and Cochran fellowship programs as opportunities for educational exchange. Atencio mentioned LUZ is in the process of renewing its working agreement with CEVAZ and would look for ways to improve upon it.

Press Interviews

18. (C) Esteban Pineda, Director of the Chavez-leaning daily "Panorama," told the Ambassador his newspaper made a business decision in 2002 not to "act like a political party" and oppose Chavez. Pineda said Chavez has capitalized on a long-term social movement though he has had problems converting it into a political movement. Pineda, who also heads an important business group in Zulia, said there are strong signs that Zulia's economy is improving. The Ambassador also met with Juan Carlos Abudei and Luis Perez, editors of "La Verdad," a pro-opposition newspaper founded in 1998. Abudei said the paper received a boost in circulation when "Panorama" began to support Chavez. Abudei predicted fraud in the October 31 elections, claiming that some 176,000 Colombians had been illegally registered to vote in Zulia for the recall referendum. Asked his impressions of the Social Responsibility in Radio and Television Law, Perez said the bill does not currently contemplate print media. He said, however, he fears that once the law is passed, the courts could interpret it to apply to newspapers.

Press Coverage

19. (U) The trip generated three days of extensive press coverage in both print dailies as well as television and radio. In the press encounters, the Ambassador stayed on message about U.S.-Venezuela relations, noting that the USG will look to improve cooperation in those areas where we can (illegal drugs, terrorism, and energy) and disagree where we cannot (democratic institutions, rule of law, human rights, etc.). He refused to be dragged into the debate over

regional elections, saying they are an internal affair for Venezuela. The press took special note of the Ambassador's Zulia connection (Maracaibo having been his first diplomatic assignment) and of his sense of humor (legendary throughout

the State of Texas).

Comment

110. (C) The Ambassador was well received by the press and public and was able to present U.S. policy goals in Venezuela outside of the politicized atmosphere of Caracas. Zulia has a fierce independence streak and, therefore, instinctive resentment toward the national government in Caracas. Though the state broke 51-49 in favor of Chavez in the referendum, Zulia remains a bastion of opposition to Chavez -- even the Chavista candidates have to run as moderates. There is relative optimism in Zulia that the economy is improving. Opposition politicians, however, are glum about Chavez's apparent abuse of state authority to dismantle political resistance in Zulia.

111. (C) Ambassador requested a meeting with Alberto Gutierrez, the Chavez-backed candidate for governor, but received no response. Similarly, a request for a meeting with senior regional military commander Gen. Wilfredo Silva went unanswered, though Post learned informally that Silva's commanding officer in Caracas denied permission for the meeting.
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